Beginnings and Endings in Novels

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Introduction*

This article addresses a number of issues raised by my research into the characteristics of the beginnings and the endings of novels. I begin by discussing the object of my research and certain methodological problems inherent within it. I then examine the implications of the notion of a 'beginning' and an 'ending'. A survey of classical, medieval, and neoclassical rhetoric will permit the establishment of links between the ancient rules of opening and concluding orations and the conventions used by writers in novels. Two samples drawn from *Le roman de Tristan* and *Gargantua* respectively, will be used to illustrate illuminating commonalities between texts.[1] Finally, in the last two sections of the paper, some features characterizing the *incipit* and *explicit* of twentieth-century novels will be discussed.

Object of the Research

The goal of my research, then, is to identify the textual devices used for the beginnings and the endings of novels and then to develop a theory of the ways in which they function. My original hypothesis was that the beginnings and endings of novels carry features that enable the reader to recognize them as such. The particular features characterizing beginnings and endings are then related to those rhetorical, stylistic, and linguistic strategies that narrators (whether they are aware of it or not) use to start and conclude their texts. To clarify the nature of the components of the textual *incipit* and *explicit*, the works of classical, medieval, and neoclassical rhetoric have been considered with a view to establishing a typology of narrative beginnings and endings.[2] In this way texts from very different historical periods can be shown to have striking elements in common.

As well as rhetorical treatises, the study of twentieth-century

theories about literature has turned out to be of great help, such as the works of stylistics and narratology developed by the Russian formalists, Lotman's and Uspenskij's semiotic theories and the analyses of literary discourse advanced by Todorov, Bremond, Genette, Greimas, M. Corti, Segre and others.[3] What has emerged is that the initial and final segments of texts usually share similar characteristics, answer to specific questions, satisfy certain expectations and follow, if not a rigid set of rules, at least some codified instructions.

The next step has been to connect the typological elements illustrated by rhetoric and the theoretical elements singled out by contemporary studies, with the analyses of beginnings and endings in a *corpus* of one hundred contemporary novels.[4] I have also tried to ascertain those features that narrative beginnings and endings share at the various textual levels (namely at the rhetorical, stylistic, linguistic, grammatical, morphological, and syntactical levels).

In other words, my investigation attempts to analyze how beginnings and endings function, what kinds of information they are meant to give the reader, in what way, they are internally linked, and with what instruments they are succesfully created by novelists. The material offered by ancient rhetoricians, as well as by modern and contemporary scholars, is certainly of great importance, but it is not adequate: being highly fragmentary, unsystematic, and often too theoretical. Hence, the need for a different, more pragmatic approach to the subject, based on a straight textual analysis of beginnings and endings which can provide a more rigorous frame of reference.

Beginnings and Endings

It is strange that the opening of a novel which has been most widely quoted: 'The marquise went out at 5 o'clock' belongs to Paul Valéry, an author who despised the novel, considering it inferior to the other literary genres.[5] But whatever Paul Valéry's opinion on the subject was, how novels begin and end is an issue that has fascinated a good many writers and critics. Chiquita Calvino, in the introductory note to Calvino's five *American lessons* (published in 1988), stresses that Calvino intended to write one lesson on the beginnings and the endings of novels, of which unfortunately only a few notes exist.[6]

The beginnings and endings of novels are interesting for several reasons, not least because of aesthetic considerations. On the one hand, beginnings must capture the readers' attention and prevent them from abandoning the text; on the other hand, endings seal a reading experience that should be unique. It has been proved by psychologists that starting and concluding points are the parts of the text that strike the readers' imagination most, since they are kept in their mind longer than the rest of the text. Regarding novels, there are seductive beginnings that lead readers to ask themselves what will happen next and there are unforgettable endings that will lead readers to feel the pleasure of reading that particular book, every time they will think about it.

Among the huge variety of beautiful beginnings one can recall the two followings ones: 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure' that is the début of Proust's *Recherche du temps perdu*, and 'Call me Ishmael' of Melville's *Moby Dick*.[7]

Among the unforgettable endings: 'But this is how Paris was in the early days when we were very poor and very happy...' from Hemingway's '*A moveable feast*';[8] or the closing line of *Moby Dick:* '...then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago'.

It is clear, however, that the problem cannot be considered just from the aesthetic point of view. Beginnings and endings are important, above all, as narrative signals. On the one hand the beginning of a text indicates to us the beginning of a possible world and invites us to suspend our disbelief and to pretend that we shall believe in what is going to be unfolded. On the other hand, the ending of a text stresses that that possibility of a world is over and makes us go back to everyday life.

The ways of dealing with beginnings and endings of texts, both poetic and narrative, had been highly codified since antiquity. The way one could introduce the fictional world created by the text, indicates, at the very beginning, what it is we are to expect later in the story; while the way that fictional universe is concluded underlines the tone in which the Narrator wants the whole text to be thought over. Cesare Segre compared the procedures of opening and closing of texts to drawing and closing the curtain in the theatre.[9]

The first difficulty my research into the topic encountered was that of defining the object of my study. What is the opening of a novel? What is its ending? What happens at the beginning of a novel? What at the end? The answer is not an easy one, since the more you try to pin down beginnings and endings, the more intangible they become.

When does a novel actually begin? Leaving aside the paratextual questions (studied in a masterly way by Genette, 1987),[10] we have to ask ourselves whether a novel actually begins with its very first words; or whether it commences with the beginning of the *fabula* (which is the logical-chronological succession of the textual events, according to the Russian formalists); or whether its beginning coincides with the beginning of the plot (which is the narrative succession of the events).[11]

It may happen, however, that the beginning of the plot does not coincide at all with the very first words of the text, but it is found shifted forward, delayed by the narrator. Besides, even when the beginning of the plot and the very first words of the text do coincide, which will be the textual portion that has to be considered as initial? The first line? The first sentence? The first paragraph? Eco states that many beginnings of novels last until their end, and it is not easy to prove him wrong.[12]

A good example is offered by Manzoni's *The Betrothed*,[13] ... where does it really start? Perhaps with the famous Introduction: 'Historie may be verilie defined as a mightie war against Time...' in which the author tells his reader he has found a seventeenth-century manuscript 'an autograph defaced and faded' and to have adapted and updated its style to the taste of the nineteenth-century reader? Or perhaps *The Betrothed* starts with the famous words 'One arm of Lake Como turns off the south between two unbroken chains of mountains...' that opens the description of the place in which the story is set? Or, again, is the real beginning that of the plot in which the narrator, having abandoned the stylistic mode of the description, enters *in medias res* saying that: 'Along one of those tracks, returning home from a walk, on the evening of the 7 of November 1628, came Don Abbondio'?

It is clear that all those three narrative moments (introduction,

description, opening *in medias res*) contribute to elicit the reader's expectations (earlier suggested by the title) and that they form the necessary condition of the beginning of this written story. All those three elements create the atmosphere and the conditions that let the text start, evoking them from the pre-textual void.

Thanks to the above mentioned triple beginning, Manzoni, a master in his work, by using an extremely skilled technique, is able to answer the three fundamental questions upon which every novel incipit is based: that is 'Where?' 'When?' 'Who?'.

'Where?": in the land of the lake of Como.

'When?': in the seventeenth century.

'Who?': Don Abbondio as character, and the fictional discoverer of the old manuscript as narrator. Having defined these co-ordinates the story can commence, to be arrested only at its very end.

Regarding the endings of a novel, similar questions emerge: does the end consist of the very last words of the text? Or is it rather the end of the *fabula*? Or does the ending coincide with the end of the plot? Once again the decision is not easy. If we think for instance of Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina*,[14] who could not be tempted into thinking that the novel is over with the heroine's suicide (that is at the end of the plot)? However, the novel continues. Why? Because the novel structure has to consider both the internal architecture of the text and the link between its parts, so that it cannot end in the peak moment of the narrative climax, otherwise (as Ejchenbaum has genially stated) it would appear as a lengthy short-story rather than a proper novel.[15] Therefore, the logic behind the form required Tolstoj's novel to be lengthened.

The answer to the previous question (what is a beginning? what is an ending?) depends, at least to some extent, upon the perspective that is adopted. As far as I am concerned, even when puzzling questions remained, having chosen a more stylistic and linguistic perspective and less of a compositive and narrative one, I have decided to consider as the beginning the first 1 to 30 lines of the text, and as the end the last 1 to 30 lines. Why? The reason is because I feel that what I am looking for can be found in both the very beginning and the very end of the text. It is not just a matter of

contents, themes, motives, but it is also a question of atmosphere, colour and tone which emanate from the first and last lines of the text, and which is difficult to isolate and define.

Rhetorical Theories on Beginnings and Endings

It is presently of great importance to have an idea of what rhetoric (classical, medieval, neoclassical) has to say regarding textual beginnings and endings, keeping in mind that, although rhetoric was linked to the oral tradition, its instruments are still of a great descriptive use. The description of the techniques has been done so well by classical rhetoricians that it can be used even when the aims of the analysis have changed. That is why a lot of elements belonging to classical rhetoric are nowadays still valid within a narrative context.

Aristotle was the first, in his *Rhetoric*, to identify the paratextual, functional character of the *exordium* and of the *conclusio* of the oratorical speech, to the extent that he does not consider them as essential parts of the oration itself. According to Aristotle the purpose of the beginning of the oration was to indicate the object of the speech to a general audience, in order both to let the audience know, in advance, the main themes of the rest of the speech and to allow sympathy to develop for the orator. Conversely, the conclusion had to summarise the main issues of the speech in order to refresh the audience's memory and to make an appeal to its emotions.

Quite different is the role that Aristotle attributes to the starting and to the endings of literary narrations according to the popular theory of the 'three parts' in his Poetics:

> Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it. (*Poetics*, 50b, 7,25).[16]

The literary narration (diegetic or mimetic, epic or tragic) is considered as a 'whole' where all the parts are essential so that you cannot do without any of them otherwise the entire structure would fall. In short, this is the Aristotelian lesson: on the one hand, the unnecessary, pragmatical, functional beginnings and endings which

belong to the rhetorical speech; and on the other hand the essential function of beginnings and endings which belong to narrative texts. Furthermore, Aristotle was also the first, in his *Poetics*, to reject the *ab ovo* beginnings typical of the ancient epos as boring and useless. In this light he praised, instead, the wit of Homer who used to start his stories *in medias res*. It is well-known that the latter consideration became an unquestionable precept in Latin and Medieval rhetoric through Horace's *Ars Poetica*. It is also well-known that the *in medias res* beginnings are the most used in the majority of the nineteenth and twentieth-century novels.

The Latin rhetoricians, following Aristotle, strongly insisted on the pragmatical characterisation of *exordia* and *conclusiones* of the persuasive speech. They stressed particularly the aspect of the emotional influence on the audience. Hence, for the Latin theorists, the *exordium* was the place of the ethos (i.e., moderate emotions and feelings) and of the *captatio benevolentiae* that was meant to make the audience 'docile benevolent and attentive'.

Conversely the *conclusio* was the place of the pathos (i.e., excited feelings and emotions) and was meant to sum up and to move the emotions (*movere affectum*). As a consequence, parsimony and moderation were appropriate to the *exordium*, whereas amplification and exaggeration were proper of the *conclusio*.

To identify further strategies of starting and concluding written texts it is also very useful to consider, together with the rhetorical treatise on our subject, the literary theory used by ancient rhetoricians to study the *narratio* (i.e., one of the five parts into which the persuasive speech was divided). The classical theory of literature offer us some important anticipations of Formalism. On the one hand, we can think about Aristotle's theory of the *fabula* (mythos) and the consequent problems of unity and organicity among its constitutive parts, as stated in his *Poetics*.[17] On the other hand, it is useful to recall the Latins' problem of composition of the persuasive speech linked to the choice between *ordo naturalis* (following rhetorical precepts) and *ordo artificialis* (following pragmatical circumstances), which anticipates the problem of the distinction between *fabula* and plot and of their reciprocal relations in the making of a text, as studied by the Russian formalists.

With regard to Medieval rhetoric, I would briefly mention the *Topica* of *exordia* and *conclusiones*, which the classical world handed down to medieval literary tradition.[18] In the passage from the classical antiquity to the Middle Ages the *topoi* concerning beginnings appeared to be more codified than those concerning endings. The following exordial *topoi* were most commonly used at the beginning of the medieval literary text:

topos of the affected modesty
topos of the dedication
topos of 'the possession of knowledge makes it a duty to impart it'
topos of 'idleness is to be shunned'.

With regard to the *topoi* of conclusions they did not survive the decline of the great forensic eloquence, since the conclusion of an oration was supposed to resume the principal points and then to make an appeal to the emotions of the audience, that is, stir it towards enthusiasm or to sympathy. These precepts were inapplicable to poetry as well as to all non-oratorical prose. Hence in the medieval literary world, a rather abrupt kind of conclusion became common, which explicitly announced the very end of the text, indicating to the readers that they have reached the end of the book. That was particularly important since at that age the only way of text-transmission lay on the unreliable means of copying by hand. The brief concluding formula also allowed the authors to insert their name, as (for instance) is found at the end of the *Chanson de Roland.* The medieval concluding *formulae* were often phrased as:

'Now be the book's end'
'Here, the book ends' and so on.

Very often the authors concluded their text with the *topos* of 'weariness'. That is not surprising since in the Middle-Ages writing was definitely a real fatigue, therefore *formulae* like this were common:

'The Muse is now tired...', etc.

Some of these initial and concluding *topoi* are found in the beginnings and endings of many novels. I would like to highlight at least three of them: 1) the *topos* which stresses the ineffability of the object of the forthcoming narration; 2) the *topos* introducing

extraordinary *mirabilia*, unheard things, etc.; 3) and the *topos* explicitly announcing the very end of the text.

During the sixteenth century the literary debate had to be projected against the background of the assimilation of poetics and rhetoric.[19] The discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* allowed a new and more profound meditation and evaluation of the excellent rhetorical tools provided by the ancient rhetoricians. Regarding *exordia* and *conclusiones*, from a technical point of view, the sixteenth century inherited the classical rhetorical tradition. In this light *exordia* are still meant to be the place of the anticipation of the forthcoming themes and of *captatio benevolentiae*; while *conclusiones* are always intended to be the place of recapitulation and of the motion of feelings.

What is new, on the other hand, is the fact that the problem of openings and endings is put into an original perspective: namely, the importance that the Latins gave to beginnings and endings as part of the speech strictly dependent upon the audience, is replaced by a neo-Aristotelian sensibility insisting upon the aesthetical relations between the text and its parts (beginnings and endings included).

In other words, together with the great Aristotelian insight, found in the *Poetics* (such as: the theory of the *fabula* and that of the three parts upon which any literary narration should be based), the great merit of the rhetoricians (from the classical to the sixteenth century) has been to define the pragmatical, phatic aspect of beginnings and endings. The fact that the beginning of a novel must capture the readers' attention and seduce them, while the endings must leave on their mind an everlasting memory, is genetically linked to the precepts of the classical rhetoric. Even today openings and closings are based upon that.

Beginnings in the Medieval and the Modern Novel

Having gone through the rhetorical tradition, it is perhaps time to consider two examples of beginnings of novels. The first, belonging to the medieval tradition, is *Le Roman de Tristan*, written anonymously in the thirteenth century; the second a French Renaissance text, is Rabelais' *Gargantua.*

In the case of *Tristan,* since the beginning of the original

manuscript was mutilated, the critical editors of our century restored it, taking as models similar texts of that age. These texts were always opened by a prologue.[20] The most typical prologue started with an appeal to the audience and gave a summary of the story about to be told. This may sound odd since it diminishes the reader's curiosity, but at that time originality was less sought-after than the recognizable subject: one should be able to recognize the tale from its *incipit*. Beginnings played the most important role in that.

The story of Tristan started *ab ovo*, from the ancestors of the hero, in a far-away past, in a way very similar to the 'Once upon a time...' with which fairy tales begin. The origin of the hero's name, at the beginning of the text, was strictly linked to his fictional birth: Tristan was given his name since his mother died while giving birth to him and, so, his destiny started in the sign of sadness ('tristesse' in French).

After three centuries we find the same elements at the beginning of *Gargantua*. The Bédier edition of *Tristan* (1900) starts in this way: 'Seigneurs, vous plait d'entendre un beau conte d'amour et de mort?...'. *Gargantua* (1532-1542) is opened in this way:

> A mis lecteurs qui ce livre lizes
> Despouillez-vous de toute affection
> Et, le lisant, ne vous scandalize:
> Il ne contient mal ne infection.

One could clearly identify, comparing the two *exordia*, the passage from the oral text to the written text; the change of the audience is also clear: in place of the gentlemen, probably gathered in a castle, to whom *Tristan* is addressed, we find the readership of 'tipplers' and 'syphilitics' to whom Rabelais dedicated his book. Apart from that, the two texts are surprisingly similar regarding the bits of information they give to the readers. What is worth noting is that the first chapters of *Gargantua* are entirely occupied by the working out of the fictional genealogy of the hero. In the same way as the anonymous thirteenth-century author before telling his audience the story of Tristan and Isolde, tells that of their ancestors, so Rabelais, before narrating of his hero, goes back to the beginning of of the world. Once again the story starts *ab ovo*, in an almost mythical past.

If we think, now, of the *incipit* of the twenty novels that form

Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* (nineteenth century), we can see that Rabelais and Zola, however distant, perform similar operations in opening their texts.[21] In the *incipit* of *Gargantua*, in fact, we find a toponymy which aims to create the same realistic effect as the toponyms of Zola's incipit create. In other words, what is important is that a continuity in the way of starting such different texts, belonging to such different ages does indeed exist. The same could be said about the endings, if it is true that such verbal indications of the approaching end of the novel as, for instance, the use of 'last' in the chapter heading, or the use of the adverb 'finally' in the last sentence, are nothing but a variation of the medieval way of concluding a text simply by saying: 'Here my story ends'.

The Beginnings of the Novel in the Twentieth Century

The time has arrived to consider what happens at the beginnings of contemporary novels since the principal purpose of studying the historical progression of textual strategies is to see how such strategies are operative in our own times.

First of all I would like to draw attention to the famous 'Five Whs' that are essential to every narration. As it is well known the questions: 'Who?- What?- When?- Where?- Why?' correspond perfectly to the so-called 'circumstances of the narration' that have been codified by Medieval rhetoric following Cicero' *De inventione*. These five 'circumstances of narration' were: *Quis?- Quid?- Cur?- Ubi?- Quando?*.[22] This is helpful in order to underline that a novel's beginning, usually, is meant to answer to three (out of five) fundamental questions, that is: 'Who?' 'Where?' 'When?' (while 'What?' and 'Why?' come later for logical and narrative reasons).

At the very beginning of a novel as well as at the very beginning of a theatrical perfomance, it is very important that the audience, in order to find its bearings, knows where and when the story takes place and what are the names of its characters. Then, since the narrator lacks, by definition, the situational context and the readers' feed-back, at the beginning of the text he must create the so-called 'situation of narration' (related to the definition of 'Who?' 'Where?' 'When?'). To do that the narrator can only rely upon the means of focalization, to represent in a given space and time a subject that produces

utterances. The definition of the 'Who?' 'Where?' 'When?', darkly uttered by Beckett at the beginning of the *'Innominable'*: 'Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant?...',[23] is always obtainable even if it is not explicitly written. It is clear, however, that in those circumstances the readers' cooperation has to be greater in order to let them carry out the necessary operations to complete the bits of information offerered by the text.[24]

So how do novels' beginnings usually answer those crucial questions? The first important question of the beginnings is that of the time: 'When?'. Time and narration are strictly linked and there are very delicate problems (often unsolved) related to their reciprocal relations. We can think, for example, of the fertile distinction between the time of the narrated story and the time of the narration.[25] I shall limit myself to underlining some of the commonest devices used by writers to signal the 'When?' of the story that is about to start. Among these devices the most typical is the so-called 'incipit-date' (e.g.: 'On the 15 of September 1840'...) so exploited in the naturalistic novels, as a guarantee of reality. During the nineteenth century the analeptic incipit was also very fashionable, that is the initial flash-back that justifies and explains the forthcoming story, as it occurs at the beginning of Dickens's *David Copperfield*:

> Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.[26]

Also very frequent at the beginnings of novels are the temporal marks relating to the act of utterance, that is the act of narrating itself. Let's think, for instance, of the incipit of Camus' *L'étranger*: 'Aujourd'hui maman est morte. Ou peut-etre hier, je ne sais pas.'[27] Where 'Aujourd'hui' and 'hier' are definitely signs of the narration rather than of narrated story. According to Aragon 'the way in which the time is marked in the beginning of a novel, directs its meaning; it is like the tempo at the beginning of a musical score.'[28]

The second important question relating to the beginnings of a novel is that of the place: 'Where?'. The essential function of space definition is strictly connected to the sense of reality it contributes to create in the readers. The close reference to the real world was considered extremely important by the naturalistic writers. Typical devices to evoke the narrative place at the beginning of the text are toponyms, family names (which point out the place the hero comes from), and even the objects (which give some idea of the environment: ex. 'a church' 'a carriage' 'a brothel'). Very much used in the initial space definition are the *topos* of the 'entrance', of the 'opening' (of a door, a window), and that of the 'waiting' which, to some extent, mimics the entering into the text of the readers and of their expectations.[29]

Last but not least, comes the third question, the 'Who?', which is the most difficult to discuss. First of all we need to make a distinction between the 'character' and the 'sujet de l'énonciation'.[30] The denotation of the character in the first few lines, which is often anticipated in the title, is very typical and is done in many different ways: from a detailed description of the hero to the use of the *topos* of the stranger. This rhetorical device is used at the beginning of a great number of novels as if the narrator pretends not to know his or her character. It occurs, for example, at the beginning of Zola's *Germinal* where the protagonist is first indicated as a mysterious 'en homme...' and only later on in the text he introduces himself telling the readers his name: 'Je m'appelle Etienne Lantier'.

To understand what is the difference between the character and 'le sujet de l'énonciation', we must ask ourselves, following Genette's suggestion, the question: 'Who is actually speaking?'.[31] The straightforward answer could be: 'the writer', but it is not as simple as that. The one who tells the story is always the Narrator. In *L'étranger* by Camus, who is the one that utters the incipit: 'Aujourd'hui maman est morte..'? Certainly not Camus, he who is actually producing utterances is Meursault, that is the person who says 'I', a non-living Narrator, 'un être sans entrailles' as Paul Valéry defined it.[32]

Bearing in mind that we can have a wide range of narrators, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article, what I

aim to emphasize here instead is that, no matter what kind of Narrator we consider, the Narrator is always the subject of the act of utterance (énonciation) whereas the character is the subject of the utterance itself (énoncé). The problem of the voices in the novel has always been of great importance: in the classic nineteenth-century novels it could not be ignored, while in the contemporary novels (e.g. in the *nouveau roman*) the role of the character itself has been weakened, if not totally dissolved. It should be clear that beginnings are always very important in order to define both the problem of the voices in a novel and the way in which the story shall be told. The very first words of a book always offer the readers the possibility of straightaway identifing both the kind of link that exists between the narrator and his or her characters and the narrative genre which the text belongs to. What I mean is that an educated reader is almost always able to understand from the very beginning of a novel if that novel is either a first person or a third person narration, if the narrator is either 'extradiegetique' (i.e. external to the narrated story) or 'intradiegetique' (i.e. internal to the story), if the narration is either a romance or an autobiography and so on. In most of the cases the beginnings of novels are *legenda* of how to read the forthcoming work: when well interpreted they can reveal to the readers not only the narrative genre of the text, but also its main topics, its principal compositional elements, its structural contrappositions.

When we start reading a book as well as asking ourselves 'Who is actually speaking?', we must also ask another question: 'Who is being spoken to?', because if it is true that the beginning of a novel gives the readers the clue for reading the text, it is also evident that the problem of the addressee of the textual message finds its solution in the *incipit*. The best answer has been given by Gerald Prince indicating the ideal reader in the so-called 'narrataire', that is the implicit reader for whom the author has written.[33] The characterization of the 'narrataire' is as complex as that of the narrator. It is made explicit in the appellative beginnings, in those which are strongly phatic, which reproduce the features of the ancient *exordia* in addressing directly the audience and are typically characterized by the use of vocative and imperative forms. Such as, for example, the beginning of Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*: 'You are

about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel (...). Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade...': here the illusion of the comunicative circuit between narrator and reader is at its best.[34]

In short, the scheme of the *incipit* is based upon the three questions 'Who?' 'Where?' 'When?' which have supported the structure of novels' beginnings since the most remote ages. That scheme has undergone alterations and inversions related to the order of the three questions and to the textual moment in which the answers are given, but it has always functioned in the same way. In other words, it is always possible to relate the incipit to that scheme: from the initial movements of *Tristan*, that narrates *ab ovo* the mystery of the hero's name and ancestors and sets it in a legendary age in which king Mark ruled Cornwall, to the experimental incipit of *Dans le labyrinthe* by Robbe-Grillet: 'Je suis seul ici, maintenant, bien à l'abri', where the answers to the eternal three questions of the novel's beginnings ('Who?': 'I'; 'Where?': 'here'; 'When?': 'now') coincide with the most extreme features of the act of 'énonciation' (that is: *ego, hic, nunc*).[35]

The beginnings of a novel whether they are classical (see the *incipit*-date), or *ab ovo* (i.e. starting in a very remote past), or *in medias res* (i.e. starting in the midst of an already initiated action), or metatextual (i.e. commenting the text itself and its starting), stay with the readers throughout their reading of the text. The beginning of a novel always tries to give its readers the person, the space, and the time to allow the story to start. According to Aragon nothing, in a book, is more important than the first sentence, than the 'phrase-seuil', the threshold sentence.[36]

The Endings of Novels in the Twentieth Century

If the narrative strategies of the beginning assure the reader's passage from the real world to the fictional one, the closing strategies prepare the reader's transition from the novelistic universe to daily life. There is no doubt that the average readers know, at a certain point, that the novel they are reading is about to end, just as the members of the audience in the cinema begin to become restless when they sense the film is coming to its end. Usually, apart from

the decreasing volume of the pages which are left, the readers understand that they are at the end of the book when they feel a sensation of closure, realizing that nothing important has been omitted in the text since their expectations have been fulfilled, satisfactorily or not as the case may be.

Henry James said disdainfully that the endings of the nineteenth-century novels were nothing but a final distribution of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, children, millions, etc.[37] Forster corroborates such a statement by saying that if it had not been for marriage and death he would not know how an average writer could have concluded his/her novel.[38] Leaving sarcasm apart, I would like to stress the following six among the commonest types of endings used by novelists:

I) endings that emphasize and express explicitly the 'end' and all its variations such as: 'death' 'illness' 'dismissal' 'departure' 'farewell' 'moral of the story' 'memory' 'regret' 'repentance' 'late evening' 'night' 'falling' 'silence' etc. This procedure has much to do with a sort of textual mimesis. It is a sort of meta-textual comment on the text itself, since during its own closure the text relies on linguistic metaphors alluding to the 'end'. This device is very much like the one, used at the beginning of novels, that expresses clearly the 'début', the opening, the starting of the text, its novelty etc., as happens, for example, at the beginning of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: (where we find the adjective 'nouveau' relating to Charles Bovary entering his classroom for the very first time).[39]

II) A second type of ending is found when the ending itself is presented as a new beginning (as those of the cyclical novels written by Balzac and Zola).

III) A third type of endings is that of parallel endings that is endings using thematical, stylistic, or linguistic elements that had already appeared in other places in the text (as it commonly occurs in García Márquez's novels), and also circular endings, those using elements already present in the beginning of the text. Among the latter I'd like to draw attention to the ending of Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina*. The novel starts with the well-known short sentence: 'All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.' and ends with the statement of the happiness Levin eventually reached:

> 'I shall lose my temper with Ivan the coachman, I shall still embark on useless discussion and express my opinions inopportunely; there will still be the same wall between the sanctuary of my inmost soul and other people, even my wife; I shall probably go on scolding her in my anxiety repenting of it afterwards; I shall still go on praying, but my life now, my whole life, independently of anything that can happen to me, every minute of it is no longer meaningless as it was before, but has a positive meaning of goodness with which I have the power to invest it.'[40]

This particular ending also offers us a magnificent proof of the fact that a novel always ends as soon as happiness commences. Stories have to finish with what cannot be told and actually happiness cannot be told. That is why the novel can only die of happiness. That is why all fairy tales end with the formula 'And they lived happily ever after'. I like to remember that what I have just said is a corollary of Propp's statement about the *conditio sine qua non* of the beginning of every fairy tale,[41] that is always determined by a lack or a loss: in other words by a situation of very tellable unhappiness.

IV) The fourth type of endings is formed of endings which overturn their function and become the real beginning of the text. Among these the unsurpassed example is represented by Proust's *Recherche* where the protagonist Marcel, in the book's last words, starts being a narrator. The narrator of the *Recherche* that, in an apparently paradoxical way, he has just finished writing.[42]

V) The fifth type of endings is formed of very short, neutral endings, typical of the naturalistic novels, linked to the 'tranche de vie' poetics. They look like a simple stopping, we could call them endings *in medias res.*

VI) The last kind of endings I wish to point to in this article is that of the self-referring ones. They are meta-literary endings, characterized by elements stressing the problem of writing itself and of the labour of the writer. In such cases the textual close becomes the place of a retrospective query on the deepest meaning of the text.

From the point of view of composition the ending can be either the inversion of the contents of the beginning (according to Bremond);[43] or the resolution of some missing element in the very beginning (according to Propp);[44] or the realization of the search

which was planned at the opening of the text (according to Greimas);[45] or, finally, as solution of some contradiction stated in the initial textual lines.

Whatever is the theme or the narrative function of the ending to a novel, the way in which a novel ends is always highly ritualized, it is strongly codified. The ritualization of the closing devices (as well as that of the opening ones) is mainly made within either the literary genre to which the text belongs or its sub-genres. The literary genre always fixes the opening and closing procedures of the texts belonging to it. If we think, for instance, of the hero's death, which is a highly stereotyped closing device, we see that it is usable in different functions and positions: the death of *Anna Karenina*, at the apex of a narrative *climax*, is very different from the death of the hero of a hagiographical novel or the death of the character in a detective story, since in these last two cases it is the death that allows the story to start.

The close, the ending is a fundamental element for the text's readability, since it makes up a *corpus* of texts already read. The ending plays a fundamental phatic role; the role of a quotation; the role of an intertextual agent; the role of an appeal to the reader's competence. The ending is the point at which the knowledge of the cultural community is inserted into the text, the point of contact between the text and what is outside the text. It is the product of pragmatics, semantics, and syntatics.

NOTES

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[1] *Le roman de Tristan*, ed. by Bédier, (1900). Rabelais, *Gargantua*, ed. by Defaux, (Paris, 1994).

[2] For a view of classical rhetoric see: Aristotle, *Rhetoric* ed. R. Jebb (Cambridge, 1909). Cicero, *De inventione*, and *Divisions de l'art oratoire*, ed. H. Bornecque (Paris, 1924). Pseudo-Cicero, *Retorica ad Herennium*, ed. G. Achard (Paris, 1989). Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* ed. J. Cousin (Paris, 1975-80). Horace, Ars Poetica, ed. C. Brink (Cambridge, 1971).

[3] See: Todorov, 'Les catégories du récit littéraire', (Paris, 1966); 'Poétique', (Paris, 1968). Bremond, *Logique du récit*, (Paris, 1973). Genette, *Figure III*, (Paris, 1972). Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*, (Paris, 1966); *Du sense*, (Paris, 1970); *Du sense II*, (Paris, 1983). M. Corti, *Principi della comunicazione letteraria*, (Milan, 1976). C. Segre, Avviamento all'analisi del testo letterario, (Turin, 1985) e Le strutture e il tempo, (Turin, 1974). Uspenskij, *A Poetics of composition*, (Los Angeles, 1973).

[4] So far the *corpus* is made of eighty Italian novels (mainly of the twentieth century with some texts of the last part of the nineteenth century) and a number of classical novels (belonging to foreign literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century).

[5] In the *Manifeste du surrealism* (Paris, 1924), André Breton states that Paul Valéry uttered those words during one of their private conversations as sample of what Valéry would never have wanted to write (p.23).

[6] Calvino, *Lezioni americane*, (Milan, 1988).

[7] Proust, *Recherche*, (Paris, 1987-89); Melville, *Moby Dick*, (London, 1992).

[8] Hemingway, *A moveable feast*, n.d.

[9] Segre, Avviamento..., (1985), p. 37-38.

[10] Genette, *Seuils*, (Paris, 1987).

[11] For the concept of *sujet and fabula*, see B. Tomasevskij, in *I formalisti russi*, ed, T. Todorov (Turin, 1968), pp. 305-350. For the opposition of *discours* and *histoire*, see T. Todorov, 'Les catégories du récit littéraire', Communications, 8, 1966 pp.125-51. For the couple *récit* and *histoire*, see G. Genette, *Figure III*, (Paris, 1972), p.72. For the opposition *récit racontant* and *récit raconté*, see C. Bremond, *Logique du récit*, (Paris, 1973), p.321.

[12] See Eco's *Introduction* to G. Papi and F.Presutto, *Era una notte buia e tempestosa*, (Milano: 1993), p. 12.

[13] A. Manzoni, *The betrothed*, (London, 1952).

[14] L. Tolstoj, *Anna Karenin*, (London, 1987).

[15] B. Ejchenbaum, 'Teoria della prosa', in *I formalisti russi*, ed. by T. Todorov, (Torino, 1968), p. 240.

[16] Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. D. Lucas (Oxford, 1924).

[17] For the Aristotelian theory about *mythos* (récit), see *Poetics* 51[a], 8, 16-35).

[18] The problem of Medieval rhetoric has been studied, among the others, by: Curtius, *Letteratura europea e Medio Evo latino*, (Florence, 1992); Lausberg, *Elementi di Retorica*, (1969); Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, (Aldershot, 1988); Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Age*, (Los Angeles, 1974).

[19] See: Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, (Chicago, 1961) and *Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento*, ed.by Wamberg, (1970).

[20] On the medieval 'prologue': Hunt, 'Tradition and originality in the Prologues of Chestien de Troyes', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 8, (1972) pp.320-44, and Shultz, 'Classical Rhetoric, Medieval poetics, and the Vernacular Prologue', *Speculum*, 59 (1984) pp.1-15.

[21] Zola, *Rougon Macquart*, (Paris, 1960-66). Here are some samples of the beginnings of Zola's novels: 'Lorsqu'on sort de Plassans par la porte de Rome, située au sud de la ville on trouve, à droite de la route de Nice...' (*La fortune des Rougon*); 'Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, un embarras de voitures arrêta le fiacre chargé de trois malles, qui

amenait Octave de la gare de Lyon.' (Pot-Bouille); 'Pendant le rude hiver de 1860, l'Oise gela...' (Le rêve).

[22] For further information on this aspect see Mortara Garavelli, *Manuale di retorica*, (Milan, 1985), pp. 68-75.

[23] Beckett, *L'innominable*, (Paris, 1953).

[24] For a view of this aspect: Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago, 1961); M. Corti, *Principi...*, (1976); Eco, *Lector in fabula*, (Milan, 1979); Iser, *The implied Reader*, (Baltimore, 1978); Pagnini, *Pragmatica della letteratura*, (1980); Suleiman and Crosma, *The Reader in the Text*, (1980).

[25] This fundamental narrative problem has been inverstigated, amongst the others, by: Benveniste, Problèmes de linguistique générale, (1966); Bronzwaer, *Tense in the Novel*, (1970); Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, (1983); Segre, *Avviamento...*, (1985) and *Le strutture e il tempo*, (1974); Weinrich, *Tempus...*, (1971).

[26] Dickens, *David Copperfield*, (Oxford, 1981).

[27] Camus, *L'étranger*, (Paris, 1994).

[28] Aragon, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou les incipit*, (Geneva, 1969), p.132.

[29] Duchet, 'Idéologie de la mise en texte', *La pensée*, 215, (1980), pp.95-108.

[30] This aspect has been discussed at length by Genette in *Figure III*, (Paris, 1972).

[31] Genette, (Paris, 1972), p.112.

[32] Valéry, 'Poètique', in *Cahiers*, II vol, (Paris, 1988), p.1019.

[33] Prince, 'Introduction à l'étude du narrataire', *Poétique*, 14 (1973) pp.178-194.

[34] Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, (London, 1981).

[35] Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe*, (Paris, 1959).

[36] Aragon *Je n'ai jamais appris a écrire ou les incipit*, (1969), p.108.

[37] James, *The art of criticism*, (Chicago, 1986), p.211.

[38] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (New York, 1927), p.51.

[39] Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, (Paris, 1961).

[40] L. Tolstoj, *Anna Karenin*, (London, 1987).

[41] Propp, *Morfologia della fiaba*, (Turin, 1966).

[42] Proust, *Recherche*, (Paris, 1987-89).

[43] Bremond, *Logique du récit*, (Paris, 1973).

[44] Propp, *Morfologia della fiaba* (Turin, 1966).

[45] Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*, (Paris, 1966).